

THE PAINS OF MARRIAGE

My uncle came to a stop outside a stationer's shop in Oxford-street. When I saw what had caught his attention I reproached myself for my thoughtlessness.

"Come," said I, "tell me what you think of--of representative government."

"It's no good, George. You did the same thing at the cake shop. Do you think I never saw the cake shop? Since this affair was settled I think every shop I pass reminds me of it--even the gunsmith's. I never suspected before how entirely retail trade turned on marriage--except, perhaps, the second-hand book shops. The whole world seems a-marrying.

"It's queer," said he, "that a little while ago the thing that worried me to the exclusion of everything else was the idea of being married, and now it is so near it's entirely the getting married that upsets me. I have forgotten the horrid consequences in the horror of the operation."

"It's much the same," said I, "at an execution."

"Look at those cards." He waved his hand towards a neat array of silver and white pasteboard. "'Jemima Smith,' with an arrow through the Smith, and 'Podger' written above it, and on the opposite side 'Mr

and Mrs John Podger.' That is where it has me, George."

We went on past a display of electroplate with a card about presents in the window, past a window full of white flowers, past a carriage-builder's and a glove shop. "It's like death," said my uncle; "it turns up everywhere and is just the same for everybody. In that cake shop there were piles and piles of cakes, from little cakes ten inches across up to cakes of three hundredweight or so; all just the same rich, uneatable, greasy stuff, and with just the same white sugar on the top of them. I suppose every day they pack off scores. It makes one think of marrying in swarms, like the gnats. I catch myself wondering sometimes if the run of people really are separate individuals, or only a kind of replicas, without any tastes of their own. There are people who would rather not marry than marry without one of those cakes, George. To me it seems to be almost the most asinine position a couple of adults can be in, to have to buy a stone or so of that concentrated biliousness and cut it up, or procure other people to cut it up, and send it round to other adults who would almost as soon eat arsenic. And why cake--infantile cake? Why not biscuits, or cigarettes, or chocolate? It seems to me to be playing the fool with a solemn occasion."

"You see, it is the custom to have cake."

"Well, anyhow, I intend to break the custom."

"So did I, but I had it all the same."

My uncle looked at me.

"You see," said I, "when a woman says you must do this or that--must have cake at a wedding, for instance--you must do it. It is not a case for argument. It is a kind of privilege they have--the categorical imperative. You will soon learn that."

Evidently the question was open. "But why do they say you must?"

"Other women tell them to. They would despise any one dreadfully who did not have a really big cake--from that shop."

"But why?"

"My dear uncle," said I, "you are going into matrimony. You do not show a proper spirit."

"The cake," said my uncle, "is only a type. There is this trousseau business again. Why should a woman who is going to marry require a complete outfit of that sort? It seems to suggest--well, pre-nuptial rags at least, George. Then the costume. Why should a sane healthy woman be covered up in white gauze like the confectionery in a shop window when the flies are about? And why----?"

He was going on in quite an aggressive tone. "There isn't a why," I said, "for any of it." This sort of talk always irritates a married man because it revives his own troubles. "It's just the rule. Surely, if a wife is worth having she is worth being ridiculous for? You ought to be jolly glad you don't have to wear a fool's cap and paint your nose red. 'More precious than rubies'----"

"Don't," he said.

"It must be these tradesmen," he began bitterly after an interval.

"Some one must be responsible, and it's just their way. Do you know, George, I sometimes fancy that they have hypnotised womankind into the belief that all these uncomfortable things are absolutely necessary to a valid marriage--just as they have persuaded the landlady class that no house is complete without a big mirror over the fireplace and a bulgy sideboard. There is a very strong flavour of mesmeric suggestion about a woman's attitude towards these matters, considered in the light of her customary common sense. Do you know, George, I really believe there is a secret society of tradesmen, a kind of priesthood, who get hold of our womenkind and muddle them up with all these fancies. It's a sort of white magic. Have you ever been in a draper's shop, George?"

"Never," I said: "I always wait outside--among the dogs."

"Have you ever read a ladies' newspaper?"

"I didn't know," said I, "that there was any part to read. It's all advertisements; all the articles are advertisements, all the paragraphs, the stories, the answers to correspondents--everything."

"That's exactly what makes me think the tradesmen have hypnotised the sex. It may be they do it in those drapers' dens. A man spots that kind of thing at once and drops the paper. Women go on year after year, simply worshipping a paper hoarding of that kind, and doing patiently everything they are told to do therein. Anyhow, it is only in this way that I can account for all these expensive miseries of matrimony. I can't understand a woman in full possession of her faculties deliberately exasperating the man she has to live with--I suppose all men submit to it under protest--for these stale and stereotyped antics. She must be magnetised."

"They are not stale to her," I said.

"Mrs Harborough----" he began.

"Of course, a widow!--I forgot," I said. "But she seems so young, you know."

"And putting aside the details," said my uncle, with a transient dash of cheerfulness at my mistake; "I object to the publicity of the whole thing. It's not nice. To bring the street arab into the affair, to subject yourself to the impertinent congratulations and presents of

every aspirant to your intimacy, to be patted on the back in the local newspapers as though you were going to do something clever. Confound them! It's not their affair. And I'm too old to be a blushing bridegroom. Then think, what am I to do, George, if that cad Hagshot sends me a present?"

"It would be like him if he did," I said. "I fancy he will."

"I can't go and kick him," said my uncle.

"Declined with thanks," I suggested, "owing to pressure of other matter."

"You are getting shoppy, George," said my uncle, in as near an approach to a querulous tone as I have heard from him.

"You are getting married," I replied, with the complacency of one whose troubles are over. "But it's a horrible nuisance, anyhow. Still, the world grows wiser, and the burden is not quite so bad as it used to be. A hundred years hence----"

"I'd be willing enough to wait," said my uncle; "but I'm not the only party in this affair."

He was willing enough to wait, perhaps, but time was inexorable. Save

for one hurried interview, I did not see him again for a week, and then it was before the altar. His garrulity had fallen from him like a garment. He was preoccupied and a trifle bashful. He fumbled with the ring. I felt almost as though he was my younger brother.

I stood by him to the end, and at last came the hour of parting. I grasped his hand in silence: silently he mastered a becoming emotion. And in silence he went from me unto the New Life.